

## Truth as Conformation in Herbert of Cherbury

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### Abstract

Thomas Aquinas, like many other, but by no means all medieval theologians and philosophers, espoused a theory of truth by identity. Truth exists primarily in the mind, but insofar as it *realises the truth of things*, truth exists in things also. Both truth and meaning are inherent to form, which shines forth in things to render them as things, or as exemplars of universal essences. In the event and act of knowledge, form as *species* migrates from things into one's mind by a process involving at once passive stamping, active abstraction, and imaginative mediation. To know in this manner is to manifest, and express further the truth of things which is intrinsic to their very being. It is not merely to think logically or coherently, or to judge correctly as to evidence, though these things are certainly involved. Nor is it to 'represent' in a detached fashion a supposedly objective reality that is in itself alien to meaning or truthfulness.

### Keywords

Truth, Aquinas, Herbert McCabe OP, Hubert Dreyfus, Locke

Such a theory of truth as the realisation of a teleological identity that is inherently *supposed* to exist between things and mind can be contrasted with modern accounts of truth which regard it either as *mirroring representation*, as warranted *experimental assertion*, as *logical coherence* or as an ultimately redundant *registration of the way things are*, rendering the word 'truth' but another way to articulate 'being' or 'existence'.

For most modern thinkers, and even for many Thomists, including the late Herbert McCabe of the Oxford Dominicans, Aquinas's account of truth in terms of *species* can seem to belong to an outmoded and exotic mode of metaphysics. It is often tacitly assumed that such metaphysics were rightly refused in the early modern period, however critical one may claim to be of Bacon, Descartes and Locke. Even strong critics of modern epistemological theories of truth, such as

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, are chary of espousing a full-blown theory of truth as identity. They prefer to characterise pre-modern notions of truth as theories of truth by '*contact*', and modern, representational ones as theories of truth by '*mediation*'. Yet to some extent, this terminology, however accurate in many ways, rather glosses over the mediating role played by form as *species* and ignores the point that knowledge as entirely unmediated contact is another mode of modern thinking about truth, as articulated by Thomas Reid, though found already in the Middle Ages with the Franciscan Peter John Olivi. Equally, the modern mode of the theory of knowledge by contact recommended by Dreyfus and Taylor, namely in terms of one's bodily immersion in the world, does not really allow for the inherent meaningfulness of things, in the way that Aquinas did, and so is not better protected against the possibility of subjective relativism than are theories of truth as representation.

It is better perhaps to talk of pre-modern approaches to truth in terms of identity and not of contact alone. But are not all such approaches today now unthinkable? There can be two reasons for supposing otherwise.

First, it can be argued that modern theories of truth are scarcely theories of *truth* at all. If truth merely asserts, in whatever manner, '*what is the case*' with being, then the word 'truth' is truly redundant. And if indeed the mind can '*correspond*' to being, then how does one know that such 'correlation' is accurate, and how does one understand it to be possible? As Quentin Meillassoux has argued, modern philosophy since Kant cannot really answer the latter question. If, on the other hand, 'truth' relates to *coherence*, then why is anything that is merely consistent within its own terms *necessarily 'true' in any wider context?* Finally, if only changeable and contingent things are true, as tends to be the case for modern theories, then are they not just 'true' in a merely trivial sense?

By contrast, for there really to be truth, three things are requisite. First, there must be an inherent connection between objects and subjects, between things and spirits, between things known and knowing minds. Truth must, in some sense, be *supposed* to be there. It must be analogical, really relational, horizontally participatory, and teleological. To know must be an event in the life of that which is known, bringing it to fruition.

Secondly, the intrinsic order between thing and mind, object and subject, cannot be exhausted as contingent, subject to endless change and ultimate dissolution. It must somehow reflect the eternal and participate in it.

But it is not enough that truth should be eternal, and that participation in this truth should engender an order of conformation between reality and spirit. If this conformation participates in the eternal, the eternal cannot be a matter of ineffable being. It must, to use Plato's term, be

*dynamis*. It must, in the third place be one with self-expression, and one perforce does not know of any existence which does not manifest itself. Phenomenology may not exhaust ontology, but there cannot be an ontology without phenomenology. To be is to show, and to express oneself, and so potentially to relate oneself to a third factor. If the finite conformation of object and subject participates in the eternal, or *conforms* to it, then one must conceive the eternal, or the infinite, as *itself* an eternal correlation between being and its expression or manifestation. This expression is eternal truth, a circumstance which Aquinas of course understood in Trinitarian terms.

With these three requisites, one has an ontological account of truth, but also an ontology or metaphysics in which truth plays a central role. Without these three, one is confined to a nihilistic ontology without truth, or to a theory of truth as epistemological, of whichever kind, which is not to acknowledge truth's reality.

So if truth by identity is today inconceivable, then one can argue that really one is saying *farewell to truth as such*. But is such a position inconceivable?

A second point is that even the early modern verdict was not as uniform as has sometimes been supposed. It is rather that later thought has tended to build upon those thinkers who rejected knowledge by identity. But certain other thinkers not only defended it, but also elaborated it in new ways which one might now think of as 'alternatively modern'. It is these efforts with which I am concerned in this lecture.

Edward Herbert, Robert Greville, and Anne Conway are writers who belong to what the philosopher J. H. Muirhead argued was the majority report of Anglo-American philosophy, and not that of empiricism: a current which he described as 'Platonic' and 'idealist', but which one might today more accurately describe as, in its original inception, 'Platonic-Hermeticist', with a continuing admixture of Scholasticism.<sup>1</sup> The rival current to this philosophy in England was Baconianism, but this was perhaps more ethically pragmatic than primarily empiricist. Moreover, Baconianism could itself be 'Platonic', and the 'Platonists' included Baconian elements of modern interest in observation, experiment, conjecture, and technology.

This philosophical current was by no means unique to England. Its presence was perhaps particularly marked, however, because of the politically enforced circumstances of the English Reformation, and the unease of many English intellectuals with the extremes of Protestant doctrine and its doctrinal arguments.<sup>2</sup> At the same time,

<sup>1</sup> J.H. Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy: Studies in the History of Idealism in England and America* [1931] (London: Routledge, 2018). My thanks to Father Dominic White for inviting me to deliver the Annual Aquinas Lecture at Blackfriars Cambridge, in 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*, P. R. Anstey ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

unease with Catholic authoritarianism was increased by the Counter-Reformation. For these reasons, these thinkers can be seen as sustaining currents of Renaissance theology, which had itself sought out a different kind of ecclesial reform. The rational quest for truth had been at the centre of this seeking, though it had not conceived reason in separation from faith, nor from grace. In continuity with the Fathers, and with Aquinas, this current problematised, against contemporary scholasticism and contemporary Protestantism, a duality of nature and grace. At its core, as for John Colet,<sup>3</sup> lay a revived interest in Plato, whose corpus was by this time available, together with an appreciation of the Neoplatonic writings and associated but more enigmatic texts of the Chaldean Oracles and the Hermetic corpus. These concerns, however, were not seen as ‘Neo-pagan’ in character, as they were regarded as continuing the integrating approaches of the Church Fathers.

But this integration was taken further in two respects. First, the Aristotelean separation of physics from metaphysics tended to be regarded with Neoplatonic suspicion. Cosmology was united with metaphysics, and it is notable that this is one source of the ‘scientific revolution’ which contrasts with later, if dialectically continuous, tendencies of a mechanical physics to ‘physicalise’ the metaphysical.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the increased ethical concerns of humanism for reform and improvement encouraged a Platonic-Hermetic concern with ‘natural magic’ which was thought to improve people’s lives, and even physical reality. This was undertaken in a prayerful spirit which was an extension of a theurgic approach to liturgy which had already entered Christianity from Neoplatonism, through Dionysius the Areopagite, who was a central point of reference for Marsilio Ficino – incidentally a great respecter of Aquinas – and others.<sup>5</sup>

This current of thought, as we see in the case of the English thinkers, was imbued with scholastic categories, though it tended to be critical of the ‘Schools’, by which it referred to late medieval and early modern manifestations of scholasticism. But to this sustained scholasticism was brought a distinctively modern awareness of the need to apply Aristotelian categories with caution, and in an heuristic manner, to the perplexing variety of things, and of the receding inexhaustibility of their observation, given the complexity, infinite divisibility and expand-ibility of reality. The mutability of things, and of the human capacity to modify things, led to an increased awareness of the realm of

<sup>3</sup> See Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, trans. Christine Rhone (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Brian P. Copenhaver, *Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> ‘The goodness of a thing lies in its eternal character [*signatum*]’: Herbert, *De Veritate*, 191. One might substitute ‘signature’ for ‘character’ [*signatum*]. On this aspect of Herbert, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things; On Method*, trans. Luca di I’Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone, 2009), 65.

the artificial, and of the power of artifice – including an interest in the ways by which the natural and the artificial, and the physical and the mental, might interact. This interaction at times seemed to be ‘magical’ in character, as likewise, the human capacity for conjecture.

In the cases of Herbert, at the beginning of the English seventeenth century, of Greville, in its middle part, and of Conway, at its ending, it is no accident that these were titled nobility. For they reflect a lay, court, and aristocratic unease with clerically-generated squabbling which had encouraged unprecedentedly terrible civil and international wars. Their distinctive interest in truth and in reason was born of a concern *with peace and mediation*. One would be mistaken, however, if one were to read their work as ‘proto-enlightenment’, unless one were to take into account the at times ‘esoteric’ character of the Enlightenment itself. These thinkers were concerned to think through truth in wholly religious terms, and to propose faith and grace as part of the integral concern of reason.

### 1.1 Herbert’s Theory of Conformation

This evening there will only be time to consider the thought of Herbert of Cherbury who possessed the most fully thought through updated version of a theory of knowledge by identity.

Specifically modern as it is in certain ways, the theory of conformation in the writings of Edward Herbert is not put forward as an *epistemological* theory, nor as a theory of *representation*. Indeed, one could hazard that it possesses features which anticipate postmodern critique, though it is necessarily rooted in a pre-modern and Renaissance sensibility.

In *De Veritate*, Herbert is not arguing that the mind must ‘conform’ to things in their given evidence, and be merely constrained by this. Nor is he saying that the evidence which one receives through one’s senses must be ‘conformed’ to the way in which one’s mind works, or to its *a priori* categories of understanding. Rather, by conformation he is referring to a phenomenon of the Platonic *metaxu*, or of what William Desmond calls ‘the between’. Truthful understanding is possible because *there is a natural relation, analogy or harmony* between things and mind, a kind of *occult or sympathetic echo or affinity*. One’s understanding is an instance of the general analogy which pertains between one thing and another, of their inherent connectedness which *cannot be understood in terms of mechanism*, but rather of secret ‘affinities’, ‘emanations’, foreshadowings, and the construals of the ‘signature’ of one thing by another.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *De Veritate*, 75-114.

The inclusion of knowing as conformation within a wider metaphysics of analogy is confirmed by Herbert's central and seemingly strange doctrine of the indefinite number of faculties.<sup>7</sup> Such faculties had otherwise been considered to be restricted in number, and were construed in terms of one's general mental powers to sense and to understand. In such terms, the five senses constituted five different faculties of sensing; similarly, the will, the power to reason, the power to judge, the imagination and the memory, were often taken to be faculties or capacities to understand. The Platonic-Hermetic current of thought often criticised this 'scholasticism', as when Cudworth mocked the idea that the lute is played by the musical faculty, rather than by a musician.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, he says, it is not the will that wills, nor the reason that thinks, but a *man* that does both. Here he implies a unity and integration of the faculties, while specifically allowing that the soul is composed of varying capacities.

It might appear that Herbert had already entertained the opposite position. In an almost 'postmodern' fashion, *he favoured plurality and difference*. There are not only five senses, he says, sounding somewhat anticipatory of Gilles Deleuze: there are as many senses as things sensed; as many ways to smell as there are perfumes, and as many hybridisations of the five senses as coincide with one's manifold synaesthetic experiences. Likewise, there is not a limited number of general truths: there are as many truths as there are things, and the number of things is infinite. The diversification of truths, according to Herbert, diversifies and transforms the knower, in such a way that every time a new knowledge arises, it is known by a newly emergent faculty, tailor-made for this task and no other. A postmodern delirium and fragmentation of the unified self appears to beckon.

In the face of such a diversification, many thinkers of the age were fascinated but aghast. John Locke later responded that many different things can be known or done by a single power; one does not need to diversify the power itself.<sup>9</sup> This seems to make good sense, until one realises that Herbert does not mean, by 'faculty', a pre-given, *a priori* mental capacity. As the Aristotelianising Nathaniel Culverwell discerned, he rather means an *arising facility*.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, the faculty to know a wasp is not present, is not shaped, until a wasp comes

<sup>7</sup> *De Veritate*, 227.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, with a Treatise on Freewill* (1731) Sarah Hutton ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170-1

<sup>9</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), II, xix, §§ 16-20, pp. 242-244; Bedford, *The Defence of Truth*, 78-80.

<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel Culverwell, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature* (Indianapolis: Liberty fund, 2001), 93-96, 160.

buzzing within one's purview, or perhaps until one has been stung by one.

This notion of an arising faculty is an extension, as Herbert indicates, of the Aristotelian and scholastic theory of knowledge as occurring by transfer of form, or of *species*, from materialised form in the thing, to a form that is spiritualised in the mind. One has the power or faculty to know a wasp because one's mind literally becomes to a degree wasp-like in its inner configuration. But Herbert developed this doctrine in two ways. First, he had recourse to a somewhat Platonic construal of the active and creative capacity of the mind: a new faculty arises whenever one sees an animal, an insect or a wasp, because one is to a degree rehearsing its creation, or its coming to be. Thomistic actualisation of the form can indeed be seen as a subjective bringing about of a thing within one's mental universe. Secondly, notions of *species* are, for Herbert's theory, diversified. It is not just that one becomes spiritually animal or insect-like, but that one becomes *specifically* wasp-like, or even *this* wasp-like. For the Aristotelian and Thomistic legacy, knowledge was primarily of universals; now, for Herbert, knowledge is of intuited particulars. One cannot subsume the wasp, nor any one of the number of rare curative flowers which Herbert mentions, such as elecampane and euphorbia,<sup>11</sup> under a general faculty for knowing things, nor even for knowing animated things. Rather, to know a wasp modifies the nature of one's knowing. Now one can know a wasp; one could not have known a wasp before. Now one's knowing is a waspish kind of knowing, as it becomes now earth-like, water-like, kingfisher-like or pike-like, and so forth.

This contagious diversification, as it were, implies that knowledge is a work of occult fusion, an instance of the natural magic which Herbert's *De Veritate* acknowledges to be at work in all things and in all places. Material evidence does not constrain thought; thought does not draw in, and constrain this evidence into its own mould. And no moment of imaging 'representation' takes place in either direction. Rather, thought arises, as it were, as a silent electrical explosion of the meeting of the nonetheless incommensurate forces of matter and spirit, body and mind, in their imponderable fusion. In this fusion, an event occurs, from which something new arises. It is altogether new, but in continuity with everything, both material and spiritual, which has gone before, and is expressive of a secret affinity which was always latent or secretly promised. For if the wasp flies in such a way that it may be known, then its flying and existence always contains a kind of proto-understanding. The implications of Herbert's position are both vitalist and somewhat

<sup>11</sup> '[T]hat plastic power which reduces different kinds of food to one form [...] Thus the pike, the cat and the human being will each form their limbs in the same manner as does a gudgeon, and according to the knowledge proper to their species, direct the food to the proper points'. *De Veritate*, 169.



pan-psychic. One might also say that, for the mind to develop the faculty of knowing, the wasp shows a certain sustaining of corporeal definition within the mental realm. This is a point later insisted upon by Conway. Herbert's ontological vision, therefore, is non-dualist in character.

Knowledge, for Herbert, is an occurrence: a further weaving together of the density of the real with the luminosity of spirit, in the event of their fusion. It follows from this, as later for Robert Greville, that there is little distinction between intelligence and truth. Intelligence is a further fullness of that 'dynamic' manifestatory power which is intrinsic to things as things. When intelligence is operating as it should, it simply *is* the truth. There is no 'non-psychological' truth, unless it is in an ontological realm of Intellect lying above that of Soul, as for Neoplatonism.

Truth, for Herbert, is not a matter of evidence, of logic, or of rational discourse. It is rather immediate and intuitive. This does not, however, mean that it is merely diverse or heterogeneous in a nominalist fashion. For Herbert does not say that there is only an arising faculty for each particular; he *also* says that there is an arising faculty for each universal reality, and that these are equally real and equally apparent. A faculty for wasps, and another one for their flight, and another one for their flight on a morning in early June, and yet another one for their settling on that branch of that tree, and another for their stinging me, etc., but *equally* a new and arising category for wasps in general, insects in general, animals in general, flight in general, branches of trees in general, and so on. There is no more bias here to the specific than to the general, to 'nominalism' more than to 'realism'. Indeed, without the reality of the universal at every level, there could be no analogical harmony or operation of vital 'plastic principles' at work, for example, in the unifying and then dispersal of food through the process of digestion.<sup>12</sup>

It is rather that Herbert has added to an inherited realist outlook a new modern concern for the particular, and for continuous alteration without dispersal into monolithic flux. And whether one is speaking of universal patterns, or of novel instances, the same reconstrual of truth as arising identity of thing with mind pertains: to know coincides with the capacity to know, because the latter is a *joint* product of that which comes from without, and that which arises from within. It is a work of emergent coming-together, enabled by the reality of mysterious and slumbering sympathies throughout all of existence: 'The relations of all things are limited by their analogy. Goodness of appearance is the

<sup>12</sup> *De Veritate*, 191.



emanation of its internal character which becomes explicit through its analogy with the internal faculties'.<sup>13</sup>

Herbert's approach to truth is of a piece with his account of the real and of intellect. He does not propose criteria for truth, nor a method or ontological apparatus for locating it. Truth, as for Aquinas, is immediately apparent to the intuitions of rightly functioning mind, although the application of judgement is more contingent. There is, he says, a truth of things – of their self-sustaining coherence –, a truth of their emanations, a truth of concepts, and a truth of intellect. The latter is the completion of this series, and includes all the other truths. The intellect will arise variously as the indefinitely many truths, and as the elusive truth of their unity, when all these truth-events occur in an unimpeded fashion;<sup>14</sup> that is, when the thing can emanate properly, when nothing impedes one's vision, when one is in the right situation for observing and construing things; when one escapes the lures of shadows and distractions, including those which are generated by one's own fallen mind.

Herbert's emphasis upon intuition, designed to overcome argument and conflict, in a manner that was not so unlike Descartes, whom Herbert read with critical interest,<sup>15</sup> does not mean that Herbert found no place for discursive reasoning. Indeed, *De Veritate* includes a section entitled *zetetica*, which is, as it were, his own 'discourse upon method'.<sup>16</sup> Its purpose, however, significantly for the often curative and medicinal concerns of the Platonic-Hermetic-Scholastic current, overlapping with Baconianism, is primarily therapeutic. It was not, as for Wittgenstein, designed to purge the mind of metaphysical delusion, but rather to orientate it towards the true, naturally intuited metaphysical human stance. It is offered as a systematic guide to help one clear away the occlusions which impede the natural occurrence of truth. It is concerned with purging the means and the medium of understanding, not directly with things understood, nor with the human understanding in isolation.

Such things appear, for Herbert, 'automatically', as it were, in the register of a Platonic-Hermetic metaphysics, as continuously intuited by rightly orientated intelligence. The *zetetica* offers a complementary, scholastic and Aristotelian ontology in terms of categorial classifications: whether a thing is, what its essence is, what qualities and quantities it possesses, in which relations it stands, what its place and time may be? However, this inherited ontology is recast in a methodical, heuristic, and experimental idiom which betokens modern conjectural, philosophical, and natural scientific developments. The critique

<sup>13</sup> *De Veritate*, 83-89.

<sup>14</sup> For Descartes and Gassendi's responses to Herbert, see Bedford, 46-60.

<sup>15</sup> *De Veritate*, 232-288.

<sup>16</sup> *De Veritate*, 247.

of 'the Schools' which is implied in this recasting suggests a view that their categorial classifications are somewhat too fixed and certain, too general, and, at the same time, insufficiently aware of the admixture in known reality, of the metaphysical, physical and artificial.

One can instance this with examples. First, for Herbert the Humanist, he notes that the Schools failed to divide reality between the natural, the artificial, and 'a combination of both'.<sup>17</sup> In a passage later cited by Giambattista Vico, he describes one's perfectly comprehensive reach into the works of artifice, as alike to that of a shoemaker, but not to the wearer of the shoes, who perfectly knows the shoe. As Vico later understands, one applies the same rule of Herbertian *facultas* to understand what is meant by this analogy.<sup>18</sup> It is not that the shoemaker perfectly pre-models the shoe in his mind, nor that he grasps the effective result through observation, when the shoe has been made, but that the manifestation and knowledge of the shoe keep pace with one another in a to-and-fro of making something from an array of pre-given materials. At the end of the process of making and knowing, the fully-formed shoe, and the perfected knowledge of the shoe, arise together. The shoe, and the truth of the shoe coincide, are as one, because the shoe is an artefact: *verum-factum*, as Vico will later say; the coincidence of truth as a transcendental with the made as a transcendental.

Only the creator God has such a knowledge of nature, His creation. However, in participating in God's creative knowledge, one's 'facultative' knowledge is tantamount to a part-creation of that which one knows, into which one obtains a partial insight: a *conscientia*, though not a full *scientia*, as Vico described it, again developing Herbert.

Herbert's notion of the active and transformative role of human beings is of a piece with his emphasis upon the way in which ontological classification cannot be separated from the admixture of artifice and nature in experimentation, artefaction and technology. In this way, one could suggest that, for Herbert, metaphysics is a continuing work. In this, he develops new perspectives of dilation, mutability, in-definition and infinitisation. That such a synthesis wielded a long-term influence through the late seventeenth-century 'neo-Renaissance', exemplified in Newton and Leibniz, and later, upon eighteenth-century Romantic thought, and beyond, despite the dominant notion of disenchanted mechanism, suggests that one cannot dismiss these currents as transitional or marginal.

<sup>17</sup> Giambattista Vico, *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia: Liber Metaphysicus, Opere Filosofiche* (Florence, Sansoni, 1971), VII and Secnda Risposta III, p. 154 [translated]: 'man with every faculty makes the object proper to it [...] following Lord Herbert in his book *De Veritate* [...] for every sensation there unfolds and manifests in us a new faculty'. See John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico 1668-1744, Part I: The Early Metaphysics* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 62-65.

<sup>18</sup> *De Veritate*, 255-258.

One can also observe this synthesis at work in Herbert's categorisation of humanity in fluid terms. The human being is not, he says, a 'rational animal', as for the tradition; the human being is complex, does not stay the same, and is not uniquely rational.<sup>19</sup> A human being, it is averred, is somewhat mineral, somewhat vegetable, as when she sleeps, and somewhat animal. Other animals possess the reason that is appropriate to their self-preservation, but human beings appear to possess religion, or the 'inner sense' of the existence of divinities, and of the supreme God. In addition, in the case of human beings, reason is coterminous with one's *conatus*. But what is to be preserved is spirit, which longs for an eternal preservation, because its range is not confined by finite purpose, while the soul aporetically exceeds itself. This religious longing for the eternal is specific to human beings, and may be seen as the 'last difference' which defines the human being. Herbert describes human facultative knowledge as seeking out in every case a scholastic 'specific difference', revealing that his pluralism is not to be mistaken for nominalistic deconstruction. He considers that, since laughter is unique to human beings, this must belong to their essence, and is – *contra* 'the schools' – more than accidental, even in the sense of an accompanying accident.

Herbert's reappraisal of classification suggests an attentiveness to the metamorphosis of things and to the idea that what is fundamental to them may not be *constantly* present – as seems to be the case for animality or reason – but rather, sporadically so, in the same way as religious ritual observances, and outbreaks of mirth. Herbert also here suggests that one's animality and one's reason are not manifest at all times. This implies an investigative and experiential approach to metaphysical docketing, one that is not demarcated from the work of the natural philosopher, or as we should now say 'scientist'.

Herbert's primary and spiritualising 'Platonic-Hermetic' metaphysics, for which the more scholastic *zetetica* is a clarifying aid, put forward a division between human 'internal' and 'external' senses, the latter referring to the primary location of that which one would today think of as concerning basic factual truths of a 'theoretical' kind.<sup>20</sup> In such cases, although a sympathetic resonance between thing and mind occurs, in order for truth to arise, nevertheless the truths of things retain an external resistance to internal absorption or subsumption. The warmth of fire reaches within one, yet one does not burn. The actuality of conflagration is observed from a safe distance. Similarly, and with a Stoic hint in Herbert's Platonism, human 'troubles' remain external to one, because, of itself, the mind lies within the path of the Good,

<sup>19</sup> *De Veritate*, 208–231.

<sup>20</sup> *De Veritate*, 146–207.

and pursues the good with delight; the delight of a hunter, as Cudworth later says.<sup>21</sup>

One's apprehension of things through the senses and faculties which retain certain phenomena at a distance, are always enabled by 'the internal senses'. One knows that fire burns because one experiences inwardly its heat and light, and indeed its burning, if one advances too close, though in such a case, natural harmonies and proprieties are disturbed.

However, in the case of the internal senses, that which lies properly outside one, reaches or is drawn within, without alteration, save one of augmentation or intensification of its inherent properties.<sup>22</sup> Light passes into one. Light is a mediating phenomenon between the material and the spiritual, however, and what is apprehended by the internal senses is more spiritual in character. So beauty remains what it is when it is outside one, when it is drawn within one, but acquires a more intensive form. The inner senses register the good in things and the right harmony and order of the whole. Indeed, there is a faculty orientated towards this whole, in keeping with Herbert's general scheme. This same faculty has the sense of the participation of things in God, and their orientation towards God, which accounts for their conveyance of an attracting or drawing of beauty. Through the operation of this faculty, one is gradually 'conformed' to God. But the link of this vertical conformation with the myriad horizontal conformations is so closely wrought that, for Herbert, where the things of this world are analogically conformed to each other and to mind, they will be also analogically conformed to God.

Within this field of the religious-ethical, Herbert speaks of the 'common notions' shared by all of Humanity as to one's duties towards God and neighbour.<sup>23</sup> Commentators often puzzle over why this is the case; if these notions are seen as *a priori* and innate, why does Herbert appeal to a shared cultural consensus which spans all times and places. But for Herbert, there is nothing innate to one's mind, whose form is finished.<sup>24</sup> Rather, common notions *result* from the interaction of one person with another, and one society with another. Common notions emerge from the *most general* modes of conformation, not just between persons and things, but between persons and persons, and between peoples and peoples. This does not gainsay Herbert's naïveté concerning cultural disparities and historical variations. But within his philosophical schema, this would seem to imply the idea that inter-human and inter-cultural conforming is to be seen as a horizon, a work still to be completed.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise of Freewill in A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Imutable Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 173.

<sup>22</sup> *De Veritate*, 115-145.

<sup>23</sup> *De Veritate*, 87-89, 120.

<sup>24</sup> *De Veritate*, 332-334.

Alongside this sense of a receding horizon towards which one reaches, one must consider Herbert's hierarchy of certainty. Least certain is the domain of discursive reason, which he holds responsible for the violent doctrinal and confessional conflicts of his time. The problem is not one of religion corrupting reason, but rather the reverse. Dialectical process can readily go awry; one can fool oneself about a chain of logical entailments, or fail to see that one's prejudices have intervened. As for David Hume, the trouble with any sequence of reasoning is that a later judgement must always judge an earlier one, all the way back to the very beginning. The discursive process is perforce poorly inaugurated, and its need of supplementary revisions is never secure, and always ceding place to subsequent re-assessment. Truth finds no secure berth in this ever-moving caravan, unsure of where it comes from, or to where it might be going.

Herbert's distrust of institutional religion did not point him back towards detached reason, as it might for a modern agnostic or atheist thinker, but rather, towards what he took to be natural intuition within a divinely governed universe. After the lowest uncertainties of discursive reasoning, under the influence of revived antique scepticism, were the deliverances of the external senses. But far more certain were those of the internal senses: one's sense of beauty, goodness, and of the divine. In the case of the external senses, it is a matter of the truths in things seeking to awaken the answering truth of arising faculties. But in the case of the internal senses, it may be the case that one's dormant faculties look for things that will realise their longings; perfect human love and community, for example. It is in the sphere of religion that that faculty takes the initial lead over object: God is the object of one's uttermost search and desire, but remains unknown and elusive. In either direction – of things seeking faculties, or faculties seeking things – Herbert's metaphysics of sympathy and affinity assumes that no search can be in vain. One's searching for God becomes a certain proof not just of divine existence, but of the beatific vision, the sustained happiness which every mind longs for, and even of divine grace, which he describes as the 'specially providential' reaching down of God towards personal contact with every spiritual being.

By reason of this hierarchy, Herbert does not first develop his theory of truth as conformation and then apply it subsequently to aesthetic, ethical, and religious truths. It is rather the other way around: one believes in truth as conformation because one has a facultative appreciation of the conformity of each thing with every other thing, all of these being gradually conformed to the mind of God. For this reason, the *primary* truths are religious, aesthetic, ethical, and political, while theoretical and relatively empirical truths are more uncertain. The 'common notions' of the former must guide and assist one's uncertainties in the latter. Herbert was far from yielding to the temptation to

take cultural refuge in the certainty of the physical and positive, unlike some contemporaries, such as Thomas Hobbes.<sup>25</sup>

By the same token, the highest truth coincides with the Good, and the lure of the Good takes precedence over the manifest presence of the True, and so the promptings of an emergent faculty over the seekings of things for mental apprehension. A spiritualising Platonic-Hermeticism is here paramount. If Herbert's later reputation as the 'father of deism' is now seen by scholars to be unwarranted, it is the case that he emphasised Christian features which he thought, perhaps implausibly, could be recognised in other faiths, and considered religious institutions and ceremonies as of secondary importance. Historical revelation, though certainly confessed, seems to have been little more than a confirmation of a kind of natural religion, whose shape remains nevertheless overwhelmingly Christian in character.<sup>26</sup> Herbert, conspicuously or not, says nothing of Christology or the Trinity. And yet his sense of being as inherently manifest as truth, and of both as drawn forward by the further horizon of the good, could be interpreted as suggestive of Trinitarian intimations, of both a Platonic and a Christian kind.

Unlike later variants of Deism, his thought remains marked by a mystical sensibility which at times recalls Nicholas of Cusa, or anticipates Descartes and Pascal. Like Descartes, he regards human free will as being in the image of divine infinity, because of its limitless scope, and he holds that every divine attribute is echoed by a responsive human faculty, while the divine unity is echoed by one's faculty for their unification, which is the stamp of a seal of wax in one, coinciding with our unified personality.<sup>27</sup> In one's freedom and the unlimited scope of one's understanding, one's soul seems to exceed itself in such a way that the soul may expand or contract, while the indefinite number of one's faculties is mysteriously unified by one's consistency of self-preservation.<sup>28</sup> These mysteries of self-exceeding and unifying of the boundless are eminently true of God. In a manner that again recalls Cusanus, Herbert invokes the coincidence of opposites, whereby the boundless and unified infinite in God is the supreme unity:

'He transcends transcendence, and fills, informs and encompasses the infinite itself in the vastness of his unity'.<sup>29</sup>

This paradoxical combination of the self-contained as the self-exceeding, or, as this quotation suggests, of the uncontained as exceeding this containment towards form, can allow a potentially Trinitarian

<sup>25</sup> *De Veritate*, 289-313.

<sup>26</sup> *De Veritate*, 146-207, 330.

<sup>27</sup> *De Veritate*, 146-207, 330.

<sup>28</sup> *De Veritate*, 330.

<sup>29</sup> *De Veritate*, 330.

development. Herbert construes the divine paradox as reflected in a paradoxical ontology of creation:

‘[I]n all that is finite we can find some trace of the infinite. Thus everything seems capable of being divided into an infinity of parts, but since it must in the end be resolved into a unity (the ultimate characteristic of the infinite), infinity and unity appear to meet’.

In many ways Herbert’s approach to truth and to knowledge remained within a current of perennial reflection within which one can also situate Thomas Aquinas. Truth for this legacy, is fully ontological, fully a part of reality. If it is most fulfilled within mind, then this also means—in contrast to modern anti-psychologism after Frege and Husserl—that truth cannot exist apart from mind. On the one hand, truth is most supremely a property of thought rather than of things; on the other hand, truth *is* simply what most completely occurs when mind is acting naturally, which might include acting under the lure of grace. Truth is the most complete expression of things which coincides with things themselves when, as most of all with God, mind possesses the capacity to bring things about through thinking.

Akin to Aquinas also is Herbert’s refusal of normal faculty psychology and insistence that the human person thinks and acts in integral terms. This includes the point that in neither thinker is reason ever sundered from the will. This unity is bound up with the way in which human beings are ecologically situated in a circle alongside things, and in a circulation between God and his creation. Thus Aquinas will sometimes speak of things entering the mind through the intellect, and of the mind then going out again to things through the will; yet at other times, he will speak of things first stimulating the will to act from without, and the intellect then reaching back outwards to things through intention. In the case of both thinkers, it is this active circularity which requires that will and intellect be fused as instigating- and teleological- desire, and that intellect and things be regarded as intrinsically connected under the auspices of truth.

As we have seen, though, Herbert was able to expand this specifically ‘enchanted’ negotiation of truth in such a way as to take account of burgeoning modern sensibilities: of the fluidity of ontological categories, of the proximity of metaphysics to experimental physics, of the diverse unrepeatability of things, and of the diversity of perspective. An enhanced sense of the power of the human mind artificially to transform things was matched by an equal sense of the dynamically vital and even proto-cognitive mutability of things and their capacity to alter *us*. Yet none of these new notes in any way diminished the ultimately Platonic and participatory framework of Herbert’s reflections. Indeed, they enhanced it insofar as it becomes still more clear that the only full truth abides in the eternal, of which we only glimpse passing and altering fragments. Nor is there any diminution of the inherited sense of



the mysterious affinities that exist between thing and between things and mind. Indeed, once more observation and experiment seemed to Herbert and several of his contemporaries rather to confirm this legacy.

Thus we are led, in this case as in so many others, to the suspicion that what we take for granted as ‘modern’ is in reality a disenchanted view of reality encouraged not by secularisation in the first instance, but by a specific type of theology: in this case, one, as for Bacon and Descartes, which sharply divided the will from the intellect in the supposed name of the absolute power of God, whose unbound liberty is matched by a reduction of his thought processes to ineluctable logical sequences. For such an outlook, no thought or vitality can be enshrined within things, nor can the truth for human minds be a matter of our ecological connectedness, or of our being drawn through our concourse with things and converse with other spirits, back to unity with God as the ultimate fount of all truth and all understanding.

Herbert of Cherbury, then, can be taken as one of many opposite witnesses to a way not taken, but still open to us: a way to be at once traditional and modern in our approaches to truth.

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